



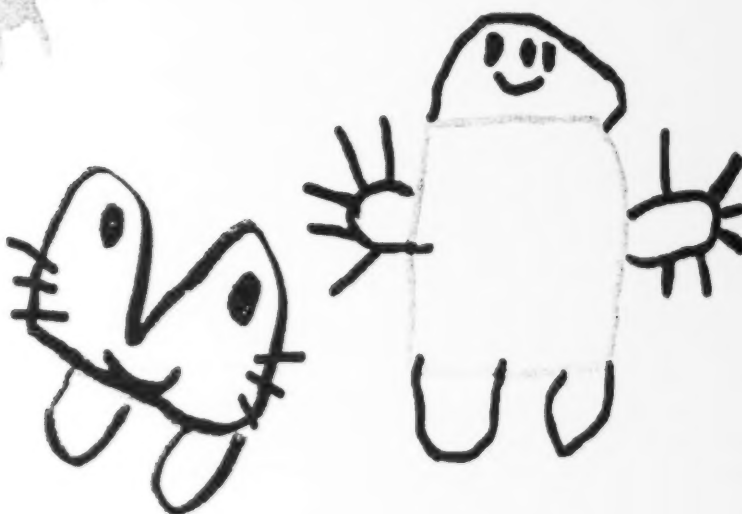
Government of
Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children

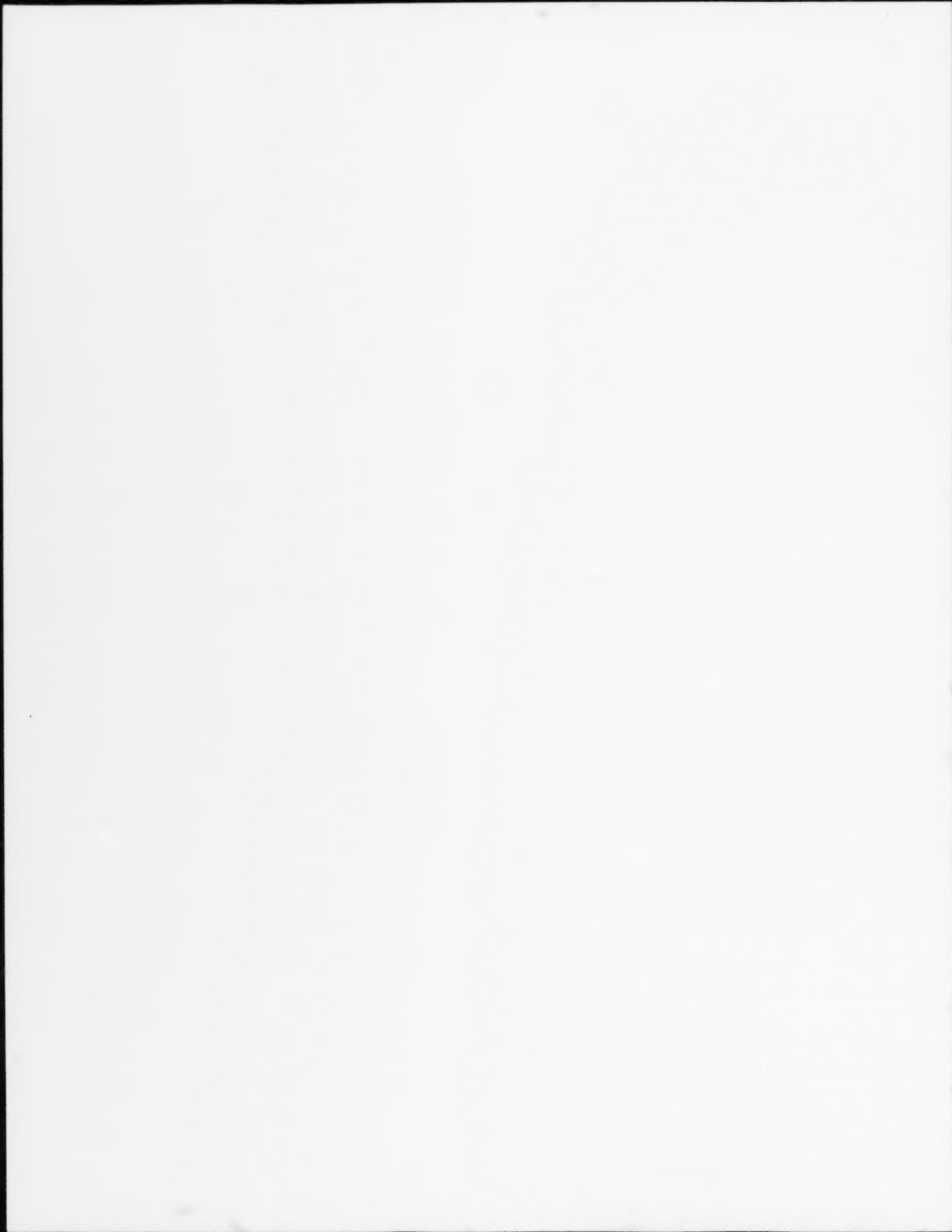


Building on Community Success

*Creating a Long Term Plan for
Saskatchewan's Youngest Children
and Their Families*



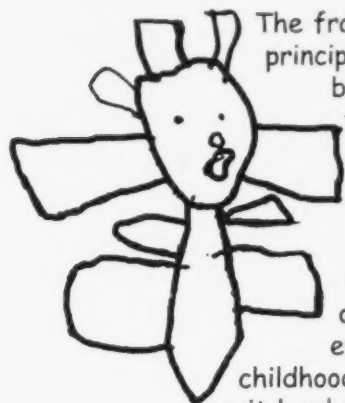
Working Paper: Policy Framework
April 1999



Introduction

Purpose

Establishing a long-term plan for early childhood development is a priority of *Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children*. The policy framework outlined in this Working Paper is intended to support the work of communities in addressing the needs of young children and their families.



The framework provides a working vision, goals and principles to guide development of community-based strategies to ensure children receive the best possible start in life. It includes elements of a long-term, comprehensive approach to meeting family needs, including prenatal and preconception supports, early screening for risk factors, services and supports to all families based on their needs, and effective follow-up and evaluation. This framework for early childhood development may be readily adapted to suit local needs and priorities.

You are asked to consider this proposed framework and discuss its applicability in your community and across the province. Your response would be appreciated by September 30, 1999. By working together in partnership, we can begin to develop a long-term comprehensive plan for our youngest children and their families. Over time, this plan can guide future investments by all partners.

Background

In 1993, the Government of Saskatchewan announced *Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children*. This innovative plan began as a vision that grew into a significant partnership between government and communities. The *Action Plan* promotes and sustains an important emphasis on issues affecting children, youth and families, contributes to a greater awareness of these issues and encourages action across human services sectors and government departments. The *Action Plan* has achieved considerable success in the first five years. Our collaborative partnership has received national and international recognition.

It is increasingly recognized that health promotion, prevention and early intervention are key to children becoming healthy, contributing adults. These strategies reduce factors such as poverty, child abuse, substance abuse, disability, and family violence and instability that put

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Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children is a successful partnership between government and communities. Participating government departments include:

- Education
- Health
- Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs
- Justice
- Municipal Affairs, Culture and Housing
- Northern Affairs
- Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training
- Social Services
- Women's Secretariat

Neuroscience and Children — Some Observations:

- Brain development before age one is more rapid and extensive than previously recognized.
- Brain development is more vulnerable to environmental influences than suspected.
- We now have evidence of the negative impact of early stress on brain development and function.
- The effects of early environment are long lasting.

(Guy, 1997)

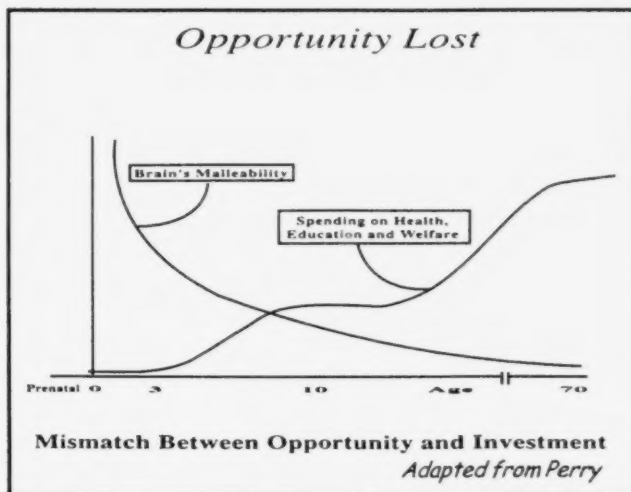
children at risk. The *Saskatchewan Council on Children*, the advisory group to ministers responsible for the *Action Plan for Children*, is one of the leading organizations that has recommended a focus on early childhood development.

For the past several years, interagency approaches to social issues have come to be viewed as an effective way to address challenges in providing services to families and individuals. Currently, a number of communities are well on their way to developing a local network of integrated supports and services for young children and their families. Organizations and individuals are working together to plan and better coordinate the many existing effective services and supports. Some groups have already undertaken inventories of existing services, needs assessment and gaps analysis, planning for community consultation and conceptualization of new programs, such as in-home visiting programs for families at risk.

The successes these communities have already achieved will serve as the starting point in the development of a long-term plan for early childhood development in Saskatchewan.

Rationale for Action in Early Childhood

Recent research in brain development and early intervention provides compelling reasons for a focus on healthy early childhood development. Neuroscientists have shown that experiences very early in life can influence brain development and have long-lasting effects. The very early development of the brain is more rapid and extensive than previously realized.



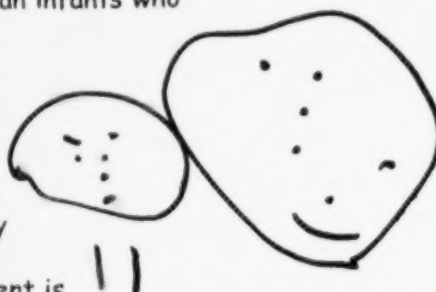
The brain is more vulnerable to environmental influences than suspected. The environment affects the number of brain cells and the way in which they are wired, thereby determining brain function, such as the capacity to learn, cope with stress and problem solve.

The brain is uniquely constructed to benefit from good care, stimulation and nurturing, especially during the first years of life. The amount of stimulation a child receives and the richness of the

environment in which the child spends his or her first three to five years of life will greatly affect the child's (and later the adult's) behavior and ability to adapt. To illustrate, one study involved infants

who were massaged for short periods of time each day by their depressed mothers. Those infants who were massaged regularly were found to sleep better, cry less, be more responsive to others and have lower levels of stress hormones than infants who were not massaged.

The period from preconception to age five has been described as the investment phase for healthy child development and the subsequent development of healthy adults. During these critical early years, when the return on investment is



highest, expenditures in most countries tend to be relatively small. On the other hand, higher public expenditures are often required later in life to address the problems resulting from inadequate services and supports during infancy and early childhood.

The period between ages 6 and 18 years can be described as the enhancement phase. Early intervention can ensure this period is one of enhancement rather than overcoming difficulties that could have been addressed when the child was younger. Both the financial costs and the costs to the child of later reversing the effects of a poor start in life are far greater than the costs of prevention and early intervention.

The number and severity of adverse early experiences negatively affect brain development and future potential. A negative environment places a child at risk of developing learning, behavioural and physical problems that may be difficult or even impossible to resolve. These psycho-social risk factors may include social isolation, child abuse, family violence, parental depression, poor parenting, and substance abuse. Protective factors can make a positive difference in families where these significant risk factors are present. These protective factors include such things as a nurturing parent, a cohesive family or a safe neighbourhood.

Prevention and Early Intervention

Since positive and negative experiences have such a marked impact on child development, **prevention** and **early intervention** are critical. The earlier children are provided with the supports they need, the greater the positive impact will be throughout their lives. For Saskatchewan, there are significant social and economic implications if our children become healthy, contributing adults.

- *The foundation of basic trust is established in the first two years of life.*

- *Around the age of one year, the speech centre in the brain is ready to begin producing language.*

- *The capacity to empathize with others begins to develop in the first three years of life.*

- *Control over one's aggressive behavior is becoming crystallized by three years of age.*

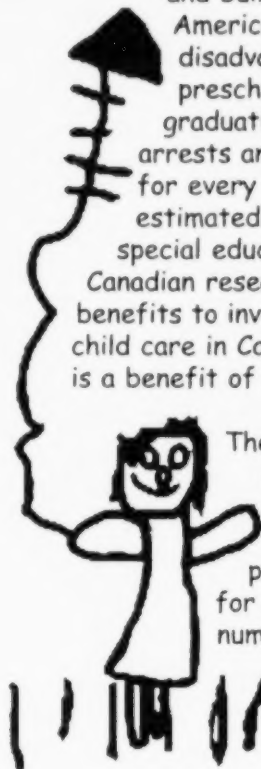
- *By the age of five or six, children have learned a variety of coping and problem-solving skills.*

The well-being of children is directly related to the well-being of their caregivers, families, and communities. A well-functioning family is a building block for a child's future potential. Children and families need healthy, safe, secure and socially-connected communities. Infants and children thrive on secure attachments with nurturing caregivers. There is evidence that the development of a secure attachment to at least one primary caregiver during the first twelve to eighteen months of life is key to building resiliency in children. The ability of caregivers to meet the child's developmental needs is another critical factor.

"Family life experience is probably the most influential factor in the formation of a resilient personality in children. Social influences outside the home, such as those gained from the extended family, the community and the school can also play a vital, supportive role. If all the aspects of their environment are healthy and nurturing, children can really thrive."

National Crime Prevention Council, 1995

Prevention and early intervention result in increased economic productivity, cost savings, reduction to social and economic inequities, and build family, community and social prosperity. An American longitudinal study has found that disadvantaged children involved in an intensive preschool program experienced higher school graduation rates, higher income at age 27, fewer arrests and less receipt of social assistance. In addition, for every dollar spent on this preschool programming, an estimated seven dollars was saved in costs related to later special education, social services, justice and remediation. Canadian research also shows that there are significant benefits to investment in young children. A recent study of child care in Canada found that for every dollar invested, there is a benefit of approximately two dollars.



There are many other studies that show the human and monetary benefits of healthy early childhood development. These studies range from those examining prevention of adolescent pregnancy to investigating specialized supports for families requiring professional interventions. A number of jurisdictions have examined home visiting programs for families with newborn children living in disadvantaged conditions. Families participating in these programs have benefited, particularly in the areas of parental attitudes towards children, how

parents and children interact, and rates of confirmed child abuse. Substantial cost savings have been found in the prevention of child neglect or abuse and reduced rates of health care utilization for preventable conditions.

A more detailed description of the rationale for investing in early childhood development in Saskatchewan and the windows of opportunity to influence the growth and development of our youngest children will be available in another paper, *Building on Community Success: Creating a Long Term Plan for Saskatchewan's Youngest Children and Their Families — Understanding Early Childhood Development*.

What is Currently Being Done?

There are many quality programs and services for young children ages 0 - 5 and their families in Saskatchewan. These range from prenatal programs to kindergarten classes, and include such diverse services as immunization, infant/toddler day care centres, home visiting programs for children with developmental delays, and prekindergarten programs in Community Schools.

While many of these programs and services are excellent, services have often developed on an ad hoc basis. In many cases, there is limited coordination and integration of programs and services. Access to services is frequently dependent on where families live. Even in locations where there are a variety of services available, children and families at risk who most need additional supports may not access them.

We know that physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual development and learning are interrelated. Usually there is more than one factor placing children and families at risk, and these factors are interrelated. A family may have involvement with a number of different human service agencies given the complex nature of their needs.

Service fragmentation has been an unintended consequence of the traditional delivery of human services that is often sector-specific. Each sector has a distinct mandate, legislative framework and funding mechanism. Difficulties in the integration of services and communications among multiple service providers may contribute to limited success in helping families meet their objectives.

Many communities are already beginning to plan for collaborative approaches to early childhood development. In some locations, stakeholders have come together to plan how the needs of young children can best be met. These groups are undertaking strategic planning, including compiling inventories of existing services, assessing community needs, and coordinating services. In other communities, planning is underway with a variety of funding partners, for more extensive consultation and development of new programs for families at risk.

"Because of the importance of the early years to the future health and well-being of the individual throughout the life span, the first five years is termed the investment phase. Although children can benefit from intervention from six years of age on, it more difficult and costly to reverse the effects of a poor start in life."

Health Canada, 1998

What Works?

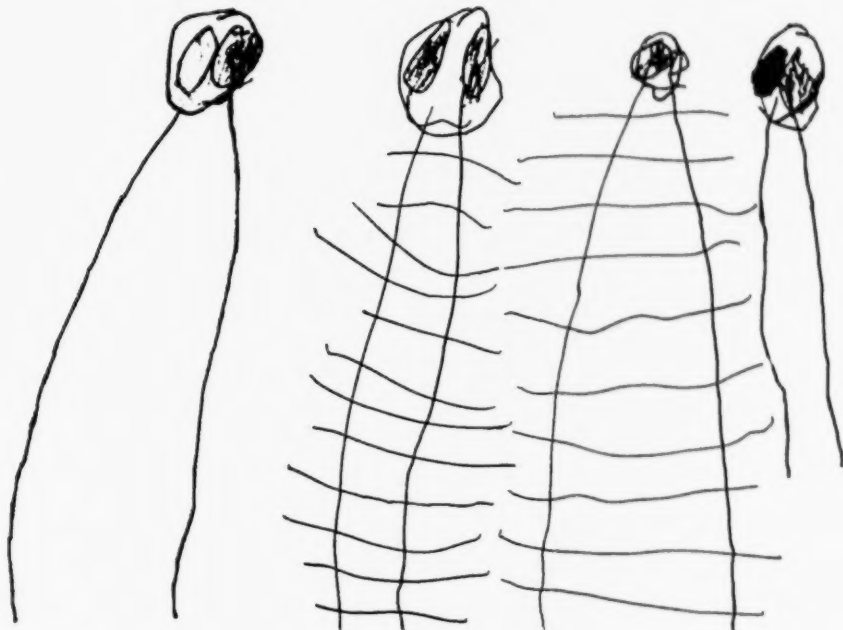
Programs and services for young children and their families can and do achieve significant successes. However, there is no single program or service that provides a complete response to ensuring the healthy development of children. Problems that families face may be complex and therefore require more comprehensive solutions.

Current literature is clear that the most effective responses are community-based. These responses involve the creation and maintenance of a seamless system of supports and services that families can readily access when needed. Such a comprehensive system would:

The purpose of a long-term plan is to facilitate the healthy growth and development of children.

- ✓ provide a broad range of supports and services to children and their families;
- ✓ ensure full partnerships in providing integrated and coordinated services; and,
- ✓ provide age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate supports and services as the child grows.

This collection of supports and services may vary among communities depending on needs and priorities. Those elements considered to be most effective have been incorporated into the policy framework.



Proposed Policy Framework for Early Childhood Development in Saskatchewan

This section provides a working vision and goals for early childhood development supports and services in Saskatchewan. It provides the principles and elements of a long-term, comprehensive approach to meeting the diverse needs of children ages 0 - 5 and their families. It also includes some examples of possible supports and services. These are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to facilitate joint planning and action in the development of community-based early childhood development strategies over time.

The policy framework recognizes the primary role of families in the healthy development of all children and builds on family strengths. It also affirms shared responsibility for child and family well-being by linking the informal supports a community can provide with more formal agency and government services. Partnerships and collaborative processes facilitate the coordination and integration of supports and services at the community, regional and provincial levels.

The purpose of a long-term plan is to facilitate the healthy growth and development of all children. Such a plan would provide a comprehensive continuum of coordinated and integrated supports and services by building on the existing resources and services of families and communities to strengthen their capacity and self-sufficiency.

Goals

Five working goals support attainment of the vision:

1. Saskatchewan children are born and remain healthy early in life.
2. Saskatchewan children are supported and nurtured by healthy, well-functioning families.
3. Saskatchewan children are able to learn, cope and problem solve.
4. Saskatchewan children are free from abuse, injury, disability, preventable disease and death.
5. All Saskatchewan children have access to a comprehensive, integrated and developmentally sequential system of supports and services.

It is important that the vision, goals, principles and key elements for early childhood development reflect the realities in Saskatchewan.

Future investment can be guided by the long-term plan that is developed over time.

Vision

All Saskatchewan children enjoy a good start in life and are nurtured and supported by caring families and communities. They receive the nurturing, stimulation and support they need for healthy growth and development to become contributing citizens. Services and supports are provided through partnerships among individuals, families, communities, service organizations and government.

As community planning proceeds, it will also be important to determine specific objectives to support attainment of the goals. Objectives are measurable and often include specific timelines. They are generally thought to be realistic expectations. These objectives can be made to the public and used to build further support for the long-term plan.

Principles

In working collaboratively to address issues in early childhood development, it is particularly important to reach agreement on the principles that will guide action. The following principles are suggested as a starting point.

A comprehensive approach to early childhood development could include these elements:

- Preconception and prenatal screening, assessment and supports;
- Postnatal screening, assessment and supports;
- Child development supports to all families with young children;
- Targeted services for children and families at risk;
- Specialized services for children and families with high needs;
- Follow-up and monitoring of children and families; and
- evaluation.

Principles	Operational Principles
Child-Centred	Primary focus is on children in the context of family and community relationships.
Preventive	Emphasis is placed on prevention and early intervention; needs are met before a problem or condition develops and requires costly interventions.
Cooperative and Collaborative	Emphasis is placed on inclusive processes, shared responsibility and partnerships.
Comprehensive	Supports and services are holistic, coordinated, integrated and developmentally sequential.
Equitable	The aim is to achieve equal opportunity and benefit for all children and their families, regardless of race, color, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, gender disability, marital or family status, religion, creed, sexual orientation or receipt of public assistance.
Empowering	Children's family and community relationships are protected and supported. Empowerment stems from community-based capacity building, involvement and development.
Culturally-Affirming	Supports and services are responsive to and respectful of unique cultural contributions.
Accountable	There is efficient and effective use of formal and informal government and community resources and monitoring of progress toward objectives.

Elements of Early Childhood Development Services and Supports

A comprehensive approach to early childhood development could include the elements shown in the table below. Research in this area concludes that successful approaches to meeting the needs of young children and their families do not focus on one element to the exclusion of others. A balanced approach, with a continuum of supports and services, has been demonstrated to be most effective.

Elements	Description	Examples of Possible Initiatives
Preconception and prenatal screening, assessment and supports	Preventive measures begin prior to conception and birth. Early identification of risk factors and provision of appropriate supports and services are important to effective early childhood development strategies.	• Counselling and encouraging healthy lifestyles for adolescents and pregnant women • Adequate and accessible prenatal care • Incentives for pregnant teens to seek prenatal care • Nutritional supplements for at-risk pregnant women • Healthy childbirth and breastfeeding supports • Education and training of relevant professionals
Postnatal screening, assessment and supports	Families are screened at a child's birth for risk factors. A further assessment would be done if required, and appropriate referrals made.	• Postnatal screening for risk factors • More detailed assessment of those found to experience risk factors • Initial determination of services and supports needed • Referral of children and families at risk to additional supports
Child development supports to all families with young children	All families require some supports to raise healthy children. Universal supports are available to most of Saskatchewan's 87,000 children age 0 - 5 years. Services are generally preventive in nature. Prenatal care, immunization and kindergarten are examples of existing universal programs.	• Access to information and advice, and referrals to appropriate supports and services • Range of early childhood education and child care options for families • Comprehensive parenting programs and supports • Long-term strategies and initiatives to support children and their families

Since positive and negative experiences have such a marked impact on child development, prevention and early intervention are now considered critical. The earlier children can be provided with the supports they need, the greater the positive impact will be throughout their lives.

Elements	Description	Examples of Possible Initiatives
Targeted services for children and families at risk <i>A comprehensive system of supports and services that families can readily access when needed would :</i> • Provide a broad range of supports and services to children and their families; • Ensure full partnerships in providing integrated and coordinated services; and, • Provide age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate supports and services as the child grows.	Targeted services are for children and families experiencing significant conditions of risk that call for additional supports and interventions to maximize healthy child growth and development. Targeted services are generally directed towards prevention, intervention, or remediation.	• In-home support programs to provide regular and consistent contact with families • Linking in-home programs with out-of-home supports to provide effective service • Informing vulnerable families about and encouraging them to use existing and new programs and services • Fostering family and community capacity for self-sufficiency • Educational programming and opportunities for families, such as parenting classes • Early childhood social and learning opportunities, prekindergarten programs and integrated special needs programming in child care
Specialized services for children and families with high needs	Children and families who experience multiple risk factors and manifest significant problems require specialized services and professional interventions.	• Integrate home, school, childcare and community-based intervention programs • In-home support program to provide regular and consistent contact with families • Foster family and community capacity for self-sufficiency • Initiatives to address Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Fetal Alcohol Effects • Intensive family therapy programs • Respite services for families of children with special needs
Follow-up and monitoring of children and families	Follow-up is an essential part of the provision of effective supports and services. Periodic assessments of child and family well-being can strengthen a family's capacity to maintain its progress.	• Establish links between sequential services and supports offered to families • Provide appropriate follow-up and refinement of services to individual families • Include appropriate follow-up measures in all their services and supports
Evaluation	Evaluation of the community strategic plan for early childhood as well as the individual programs.	• Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the community strategic plan • Assess the strengths and weaknesses of individual programs to facilitate continued improvement • Gather information that can be used to make decisions and improve outcomes for children and families

Next Steps

The development of community-based strategies for early childhood development is an important step in ensuring our youngest children get the best possible start in life. Creating a long-term plan for early childhood development in Saskatchewan will involve individuals, families, community organizations and all levels of government. Various approaches are possible. Determining the next steps requires collaborative action, consultation, and community involvement. By building on community success, we will be successful in improving the health and well-being of children and families, now and in the future.

Strategic Planning at the Community Level

Creating a seamless system involves a number of important steps that will vary according to community needs and priorities. Strategic planning to create a comprehensive, integrated and developmentally sequential system of supports and services includes:

- adopting a common framework for action that includes a shared vision, goals, principles and specific objectives;
- ensuring that effective, broad-based consultation is part of the planning process;
- agreeing to and understanding the respective roles and responsibilities of all partners, including organizations, families, and individuals;
- using population health promotion strategies to support attainment of a better level of health and well-being;
- using coordinated and integrated approaches wherever possible;
- sharing decision-making, particularly with parents and other caregivers; and,
- evaluating the effectiveness of the system in meeting the needs of young children.

Questions to Consider

As part of strategic planning, it may be useful to consider these questions:

- ✓ *How do we use existing resources strategically?*
- ✓ *How do we link existing programs and services and community supports?*
- ✓ *How do we ensure supports and services are targeted effectively?*

The policy framework outlined in this working paper is intended to support community efforts to develop strategies for action in early childhood development. It is hoped that the vision, goals, principles, and elements of a comprehensive approach will be useful as a guide to these actions. By working together, we can build on our successes to develop a long-term plan for Saskatchewan's youngest children and their families over time.

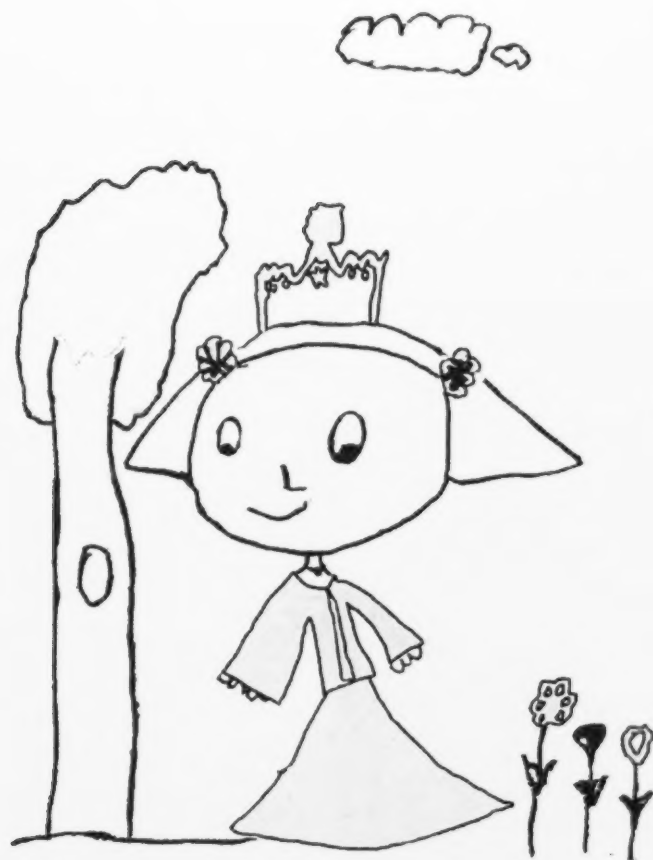
You are encouraged to share your views on the proposed framework for early childhood development in Saskatchewan.

Written response would be appreciated by September 30, 1999 to:

Interdepartmental Steering Committee
Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children
12th Floor
1920 Broad Street
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For further information please call:
(306) 787-1533.

You are welcome to copy and distribute this working paper.



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